

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 137 475

UD 016 866

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 TITLE Is Sambo Dead? Exaggerated Reports on the Demise of a Stereotype.
 PUB DATE [74]
 NOTE 15p.
 EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.83 HC-\$1.67 Plus Postage.
 DESCRIPTORS *Black Role; Blacks; *Black Stereotypes; Films; *Mass Media; *Race Relations; *Racial Attitudes; Racial Factors; *Racism; Television

ABSTRACT

This paper provides a brief survey of white racial attitudes as depicted in the various facets of the mass media such as cartoons, movies, advertisements and television and in product identification symbols such as Aunt Jemima's pancake mix and Cream of Wheat. The paper indicates that negative stereotypes that depict blacks as minstrels, cooks, servants, and as slow-witted and inept persons still prevail in the mass media. Although contemporary media is replete with negative stereotypes of blacks, in most instances the negative images are more sophisticated and less observable than those of the period prior to the 1960's. At times, however, the stereotypes are more blatant, as on the cover of a Rolling Stones' record album which depicts a wide-nosed black man with an exaggerated grin. The black stereotype is perpetuated in the pancake house called "Sambos" which originated in the southwest and is currently franchising stores in the midwest. Unconscious of their own prejudice, and unaware of the sensitivities of those persons who have long been ridiculed and degraded, many whites continue to hold biased images of blacks.
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ED137475

Is Sambo Dead?

Exaggerated Reports on the Demise of a Stereotype

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The nickname Sambo is gone. As a racial cognomen it no longer has meaning for those whose racial awareness was developed in the post-World War II years. One of the few remnants of the designation is a chain of pancake house called "Sambo's" which originated in the southwest and is currently franchising stores in the midwest.

Of all the powerful changes which occurred in the sixties -- the period in which ethnic groups trampled traditional stereotypes and the counterculture reversed traditional roles -- one of the most startling was the burial of Sambo. That the three-and-a-half centuries old image of the descendants of West Africa was virtually eliminated attested to the anger of the Afro-American and the sensitivity of aware persons, as well as to the fear of the majority of whites.

Or so it seemed at least to many individuals who placed a white wreath at Sambo's grave in the late sixties. In retrospect - in fact in light of contemporary statements, situations, movies, comic strips, advertisements - it appears that Sambo is not under layers of stereotypical soil at all; only half way there at best. As George Harris, a black student in my Afro-American seminar wryly put it, "Sambo is alive and well and living in the minds of white men. He's very healthy. He's still here, man."

Clearly, Sambo as portrayed by Al Jolson or Eddie Cantor, or Willie Best and Mantan Moreland, or in the hundreds of blackface performers who 'yah-yahed' across thousands of stages, is basically gone, now wistfully mourned by many but no longer insulting our intelligences.

Yet, it is also obvious that Sambo can still be seen shuffling around in the labryinths of the white world. In small communities throughout the country the minstrel - one of the mainstays of the Sambo stereotype in the popular culture - is still being performed. In Traverse City, Michigan, for instance, the annual Rotary Minstrel Show remains, according to the local newspaper, the Record Eagle, "One of Traverse City's biggest annual entertainment extravaganzas..." Though the Rotarians abolished the use of blackface in the late sixties, it was reinstated in the early seventies. The minstrel is an integral part of community affairs and involves residents from all levels. The president of Northwestern Michigan College sold tickets to his faculty in 1971; he is a member of the chorus. [April 10-22]

The focus of the minstrel was the inept but comical endmen. Their inability to handle difficult situations fit neatly into the racist conceptions of whites. Bumbling, in fact, came to be one of the most important features of Sambo. He could never get instructions correctly set in his head -- which he usually scratched -- and always botched the job. Contemporary media is replete with this kind of buffoonery but it is more sophisticated and less observable. Despite the number of films

made by and about Afro-Americans in the late sixties and early seventies, the inferior black male is unmistakably present. In The Thomas Crown Affair (1968) starring Steve McQueen and Faye Dunaway -- which has since played to Saturday night television audiences -- the sole black actor is a frightened crook. One of five men recruited to pull off a clever bank robbery, he is the only person who has trouble finding an empty public telephone booth where he is to receive instructions. Sweating and rushing from one booth to another in a long line of toll phones, he finally grabs the ringing phone and apologizes profusely to McQueen, the hidden organizer. McQueen calmly tells his black accomplice, "Calm down, boy...Take it easy." Riding up the elevator with a white accomplice whom he has just met in the robbery, again he is visibly shaking, the scared one. By contrast, his white counterpart in the elevator is smilingly cool.

The French Connection, the movie which was bestowed with the Academy Award for the best film in 1971, has also gone unnoticed and uncriticized for perpetuating racist perceptions. In every important scene from the opening chase of the two white detectives who overcome the young black male, blacks are portrayed as second best. The two main scenes which focus around blacks - significantly, all male -- are firstly, a bar where the customers are constantly intimidated by the two white cops. Gene Hackman, who likewise won an Academy Award for his role as the driving, grizzily detective, and his partner push around everyone in the bar, shaking them down for drugs and generally insulting them with a bruising roughness. It might be argued

that this is picayune on my part, that when detectives are looking for drugs and seeking information, they are not supposed to treat bars as classrooms. But the white-male superiority syndrome has long been a powerful operative in racial attitudes and the bar scene is part of this pattern and of the movie as well. For the only black male who is presented as an "equal" turns out to be an undercover agent stationed in the bar who winds up in the bathroom supplying information to Hackman. To maintain the agent's identity, Hackman slugs and drags him into the main part of the bar, another example of the good Negro who is part of whitey's world. Secondly, in the famous subway chase, the two other blacks fail miserably. The subway guard is shot and killed by the white -- in this case, French -- gangster who has commandeered the train and the train's conductor lapses into a state of panic. Unable to speak or to bring the train to a halt, he finally collapses, apparently of a stroke or heart attack. In sum, the stereotype scorecard for The French Connection is a resounding plus.

Not only do these racist images filter through contemporary movies, but late night movies on television further perpetuate the child-Sambo. Millions of children watch reruns of old movies: Shirley Temple films in which Bill "Bojangles" Robinson plays a house servant in a plantation setting and goes through his soft shoe routine with her; the sentimental horse racing flicks in which blacks as stable "boys" are shown currying and talking to the horses, because only blacks understand the

animals; or blacks are the only ones horses understand, the latter being closer to the animals; an exciting Humphrey Bogart film, who as Sam Spade, had a clothes-lifting servant; one of the many Charlie Chan mysteries in which Mantan Moreland as the black valet was skeered of all them spooks and took off like an Olympic track star; or, some of the truly oldies such as The Jazz Singer (1928) starring Al Jolson; Dixie (1943) starring Bing Crosby as Dan Emmett, one of the founders of the minstrels; an occasional Eddie Cantor movie in which eyes roll through a blackened face; or a Civil War or ante bellum movie in which slaves sing spirituals with misty voices. Late evening television movies are a trip back into an old, sick love affair whites had with their faithful Negroes.

Mass media is replete with other examples. In a throwback to the stereotypical cartoons of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, two aged, highly respected comic strips resurrected racist themes. The Captain and the Kids (née, The Katzenjammer Kids), drawn by R. Dirks and Mutt and Jeff, drawn by Al Smith, identify the African and Pacific Islanders as playful, cannibal and comical. In terms of dress, manners and eating styles, they are buffoons. The male African and Pacific Islander, for example, wear short, funny skirts around their portly middles; in The Captain it is a red skirt, in Mutt and Jeff it is either a small crown or a beat-up stove pipe hat. The Island women in Mutt and Jeff dress in sarongs but also have a bone through their high hair styles.

Mutt and Jeff recently reintroduced the happy cannibal theme in a long series, abruptly terminated, called their "Mission for Peace." While traveling around the world, they display the 'V' peace sign to a group of natives surrounded by palm trees and a boiling cauldron in the background. When Mutt exclaims to the tribe, "We have come to show you HOW TO SERVE YOUR FELLOW MAN", they burst into laughter. In the very first episode, done in blocs of four boxes apiece, a male member of the tribe is shown feeling Mutt's leg and then his stomach. "Hey, Chief!", Mutt calls out, "What's this nut doin'?" Punningly the Chief answers, "Oh, come on now, Mutt! Don't get in a stew -- He's only our food inspector!" The next scene shows the chef asking Mutt and Jeff for their signatures on a piece of paper: "White man of piece will kindly do our tribe a favor?" "Oh, you want our autographs. Sure!" answers Mutt and he reaches for the paper and writing utensil. "Thank you!" replies the chef. He smilingly explains "No -- No autograph! Formal dinner -- for tomorrow's menu." A conversation between the characters and the Chief about religion touches on native heathenism, a subject of considerable prejudicial concern on the part of Caucasians for centuries:

Mutt: Do you know anything about religion?

Chief: Oh, yeh, we get many many missionaries comes visit island! Well, we got a little taste of it last time missionary was here!

Mutt: Stop kidding, Chief -- Has religion made any headway here?

Chief: Some -- We eat only fisherman on Fridays now.

[Boston Globe, July 17-29, 1972]

Other areas of the mass media are not as gross but aspects of the old stereotype remains. On the shelves of small groceries and large supermarkets across the country, the smiling faces of Aunt Jemima and the black male on the boxes of Cream of Wheat are reminders of the Afro-American as cook and servant. Aunt Jemima is still as cherubic in her newly polished outfit as she has been for the past fifty years. And the broad-smiling, light-skinned man in a baker's hat and red bow-tie holding a steaming bowl of Cream of Wheat is just as helpful in his servant stance as he has been for the same period. Gone are Uncle Ben's Rice, the Gold Dust Twins, Ben the Pullman Porter and others. But have their places been taken by more realistic persons? Two sociologists recently analyzed the issues of popular magazines, Life, Look, Readers' Digest and Ladies Home Journal from 1965 to 1970 in order to determine whether mass media advertising presented a more accurate picture of black Americans. They noted that the percentage of ads in which blacks were featured and the percentage of blacks shown in all ads had nearly doubled -- to the munificent sum of approximately four percent. Half of all the blacks appeared on record-album covers and virtually all of the black models who sponsored well-known products were entertainers or athletes. Women and children were utilized in a much heavier proportion than males. About the only type of ad in which Afro-Americans appeared in large numbers involved public and private welfare and employment programs. Conclusions? It is hardly a testimonial to the demise of Sambo in advertising:

If the advertising image were to be believed, the black is a record star, an entertainer, a celebrity; if not one of these, he is a child, a woman, or a foreigner. As a male, he is in need of public or private charity, and he seldom if ever enjoys the occupational status of the whites with whom he is depicted. Missing from these ads are black families and black males, at work and at leisure -- in short, the black American rather than the black stereotype.

[Psychology Today, October, 1972, 138]

Sometimes, however, the occasion is more blatant. In the two-record Rolling Stones' album selling across the country in 1972, entitled Exile on Main Street, there is a montage of photos of offbeat, often gnarled circus characters of the 1920's and 30's. Prominent on top of the front cover is a wide-nosed black man with three white balls side by side in his mouth, thus extending it about six to eight inches across in a half-grinning fashion. He happens to be the only dark-skinned person on the album cover.

Unconscious of their own prejudices, and unaware of the sensitivities of those persons who have long been ridiculed and degraded, many whites continue their biased habits. Laurie Lea Schaefer of Ohio, Miss America of 1971, was in South Carolina addressing an assembly in a predominantly black high school when she was asked to sing. "The only thing I could think of was Dixie," she said. Shortly into the song, she asked the black students to join in. They refused. Ms. Schaefer then stopped and asked them if she had somehow offended them. An articulate black male explained their feelings to her, and an understanding into the process occurred to Ms. America: "That really gave me a feeling of what they go through every day." [Newsweek, August 7, 1972, 40]

What subconscious attitudes prompted her to offer such a song to black students? What other images exist? The same questions should be put to those with considerable power such as Vice President Spiro Agnew and Senator Henry Jackson of Washington. Campaigning early in the 1968 election, Agnew told a derogatory story to newsmen, which naturally leaked out. His "fat Jap" joke when enroute to Hawaii forced him into a quick apology in that state. Was he aware of what he had said afterwards? Has he since explored the depths of his attitudes towards non-whites?

Remarkably, not more than five years later, Attorney John J. Wilson, the counsel for H.R. (Bob) Haldeman and John Ehrlichman, the two chief aides for President Richard Nixon who testified before the Senate investigating committee into the break-in at Democratic Headquarters at the Watergate establishment, used similar language. He referred to Hawaii's Senator Daniel K. Inouye as "that little Jap" because of the latter's off-microphone aside that Ehrlichman was "a liar." When reporters queried him as to the accuracy of the remark, Wilson repeated it a second time and remained unaware of the racial derogation and the fact that the Senator was an American citizen. Indeed, Wilson likened the statement to one that might have been returned in kind: he said he wouldn't mind being called "a little American."

Similarly with the unabashed hawk from the State of Washington. Campaigning in Florida during the 1972 primary, Jackson was often clumsy in his handling of situations. At one

of his campaign dinners, seeing no black faces in the audience, he led reporters into the kitchen and he rushed over to two black men loading garbage. "Boys," he exclaimed, "how'd you like some chicken, boys?" [Richard Reeves, "Eleven Alligators in Florida's Political Swamp" New York Times Magazine, March 12, 1972, 112] And what of the renowned pianist, Yehudi Menuhin, who in his autobiography Theme and Variations (1972) felt compelled to comment about matters other than music and called Negroes the "still partly childlike race."?! [Stein and Day, 1972]

Often, of course, the racism is open and blunt. At the 110th anniversary of the First Battle of Manassas, won by the South, the approximately 80 members of the United Daughters of the Confederacy rose and sang Dixie when the U.S. Army Band refused to play it. In a good-natured discussion afterwards, members of the band explained that they do not like to play tunes with political overtones -- not even The Battle Hymn of the Republic. But when a middle-aged man said Dixie should have been performed anyway, a black band member smiled and said softly, "We won the war, baby." [Los Angeles Times, July 19, 1971]

Undeniably, the child-Sambo is much with us and deep. Ross Barnett, former governor of Mississippi who tried to prevent James M. Meredith from entering the University of Mississippi in 1963 -- 'school integration leads to intermarriage' -- was asked at a Citizens Council of America convention in 1971 whether he was opposed to integration in the cemetery.

"Well," offered Barnett, "there isn't much chance of intermarriage there." Continuing, he explained his conception of the situation: "There is a slave buried in my family cemetery. There is a nice tombstone for him. It says, 'Faithful Servant Josh.'" [New York Times, July 4, 1971, 37]

Have conditions changed much at the University of Mississippi since Governor Barnettt addressed the state over television and declared that they must "stand up like men" and tell the Federal Government, "Never!?" About three hundred black students attended the university in 1971, or about 3.5 percent of student enrollment. The figure is in line with other Southern universities. But the Stars and Bars of the Confederacy still wave over the campus and students stroll over Rebel and Confederate Drives sometimes sporting tiny caricatures of Colonel Rebel, the school's mythical mascot. There are no blacks on the varsity football team although in 1972 there were two players on the freshman squad. The basketball team was "successfully" integrated in 1971, reported the New York Times, when a single black player, Coolidge Ball, was added to the starting line-up. "Coolidge Ball," a university public relations officials stated to a reporter, "is a good boy, a real good boy." Then he paused and caught himself, "I mean, a real good man." In American terms, this is called progress. [October 1, 1972, 53]

In another part of the South, the name has been recently resurrected and the image partially perpetuated. In the lower grades in Dallas, Texas, a figure familiar to millions of

persons who were educated prior to the 1960's, has now been returned to the school library. On March 16, 1973, the book by Helen Bannerman, The Story of Little Black Sambo, first published in 1899, was reinstated by school officials in that city. It had been banned from the public schools in 1967 when it came under protest from blacks. As in 1967, the action was protested by black educators and members of a "Tri-Ethnic Committee" which had been created to supervise integration in Dallas schools. [Reuter Wire Services, March 16, 1973] The City of Dallas is not the only area of the South in which the book can be read. The Biloxi Public Library has a copy of it tucked away in an anthology of childhood fiction published in 1937. It appears between the story of "Kit and Kat" and "Peter Rabbit." [Ernest B. Fergurson, "Poor 'Little Black Sambo' - Now It's Seen as Sexual" Los Angeles Times, 1972]

Throughout the country, in supermarkets and grocery stores, in front of homes, examples of Sambo abound. Aunt Jemima continues to smile on cardboard and paper products; the chef in high hat in Cream of Wheat still handles a bowl of hot cereal for the Nabisco Company; and the black jockey figure still holds a lamp to direct company up the steps to the front door. And the name will soon be highlighted across the nation. Sambo's Restaurants Inc., despite protests and picketing groups, has been opening new stores in the midwest. In Champaign-Urbana, Illinois, in July, 1972, at the former site of a

"Dog 'n Suds" drive-in, the company celebrated a new establishment in the face of a dozen pickets who urged people not to support the restaurant until it changed its name. A week prior to the direct confrontation an anonymous mimeographed sheet protested the action:

We feel that it is only appropriate
for the Black Community to express
our dissatisfaction and indignation
to this racist insult.

An official of the company of 13 years tenure rejoined by stating that "to my knowledge, we have never had picketing because of racial reasons" and another further noted that because the store was part of a chain, the name could not be changed. [Champaign-Urbana, The Courier, January 22, July 12, 14, 16, 1972] Thus, in this instance institutionalized racism had been replaced by franchised racism -- an act given official sanction by the Mayor of Champaign, Virgil Wilkoff, who joined in a toast to the opening with the president of the chain. [Ibid.]

What can be concluded from this abbreviated survey of white racial attitudes? Primarily, it can be noted that on the national level, Sambo's image and stance in the popular culture is gone, but on the local level various aspects of the stereotype remain. Stereotypes are slow to dissolve in the subconscious reaches of the mind and culture.